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ABSTRACT

Viewer disenchantment with children's television can be allayed by creative programing that will also provide incentives to the broadcast industry. News and information programs, as well as entertaining and sensitive dramatizations of children's issues, have already fared well in the marketplace, proving that innovative children's programing can be good business. The technology exists to distribute video programing in a variety of formats, including cable, video cassette, and videodisc. Suggestions for program distribution include the creation of independent superstations serving a national child audience; prime-time family/child programing; consortia of network and independent stations for quality programing; using existing children's series produced by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare that are offered virtually free of charge to broadcasters; and using the new incentives offered to independent producers to develop quality children's programs for public and commercial television. (DF)

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"FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES IN CHILDREN'S TELEVISION:
DOING WELL BY DOING GOOD"

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An Address By
CHARLES D. FERRIS
CHAIRMAN, FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Before The Annual Convention Of The
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF TELEVISION PROGRAM EXECUTIVES
LAS VEGAS, NEVADA
MONDAY, MARCH 12, 1979
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Americans' love affair with television is entering a waning phase. Viewers are growing restless and disenchanted. During the past few weeks, the press has headlined polls that show that Americans are watching less television than they used to. Critics outside the industry and many of you within it have called for an alternative rating system to measure viewer satisfaction as well as gross numbers of households where the set is on.

There are other signs, however, that show that the public is not yet ready for a parting of the ways. We buy gadgets to make the silver screen bigger than life or miniaturize it so we can fit it in our pocket; we record programs off the air and create a program to put ourselves on the air; we play games of skill with the set and we talk back to the set.

But as the props lose their novelty more people are thinking about simply turning off the set and walking away. Even with all these gimmicks and diversions, the basic programming remains unchanged.

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Recently, a major nationwide poll commissioned by the Washington Post showed that 53% of those surveyed--the highest figure ever recorded--said they watch less television now than five years ago. And, except for their few regular favorites, viewers said they are frequently disappointed in the programming they see. More and more, says the Post, people are finding fewer and fewer programs worth tuning in.

The reasons given for viewer disenchantment are by now predictable: too many commercials, too much clutter and promotion of other programs, and unending spinoffs and variations on the same few successful program themes. In particular, over half of those interviewed by the Post thought what children see on television is a "serious problem."

Today I want to talk to you about the opportunities I see for you as leaders in television programming--as producers, as broadcasters, or as advertisers--to find new ways to fill the unsatisfied needs of the American public. I will focus on children's television as an example of your opportunities. But I do not expect you to listen attentively to another in an endless series of clarion calls by FCC Chairmen and other private and government officials to do more for children out of noble and patriotic purpose. I recognize the incentives of your industry, and the legitimate power of the profit motive, and I believe you can do very well by doing good.

It is true that of all the Commission's activities, few elicit the moral intensity generated in an investigation of children's programming and advertising. In 1974 when we last considered children's television, we received over 100,000 letters from the public. And no wonder, when young

children spend almost as much time in front of the television set as most adults spend in the office. Television is a child's work, play, fantasy, best friend and source of information about the world.

We as adults reserve our highest expectations for children's programming. We expect it to entertain, excite, enchant, enhance and educate our children. We expect wit, humor, and sensitivity, as well as truth, justice and the American way. Even Superman and Wonderwoman would have a tough time meeting these expectations every day.

But moral criticism of children's programming has been with us for such a long time that it has lost much of its potential impact. Two decades ago the 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth called upon the electronic media to take responsibility for informing and educating our younger citizens. Again in 1970 another White House Conference on Children challenged broadcasters to recognize the unique programming needs of the child audience, challenged advertisers to seek innovations such as clustered commercials, and asked the FCC to adopt quantitative guidelines for children's programs.

Not long after the first White House Conference, FCC Chairman Newton Minow gave his "vast wasteland" speech. About the time of the second, Chairman Dean Burch called existing children's programming "bubblegum for the eyes." He started a proceeding that ended in 1974 with the FCC adopting policies on both children's programming and advertising. Now, as most of you know, we have established a new inquiry to determine whether these policies have been effective. Final comments are, in fact, due this week.

What changes have occurred over all this time? Clearly, less than we all might have hoped for. Preschool children at the time of the first

White House report are now parents, and some, probably, are television programmers themselves. We have lost too much time to remain locked forever in fixed positions based on the same presumed clash between social values and financial self-interest.

My thesis is different. It is also quite simple. Innovative children's and family programming can be good business. There are new potential markets, as yet barely tapped. There are new delivery systems to be explored. Some are not based on advertising support. Others are or could be. You should no longer accept all the traditional ground rules of the three-network, over-the-air broadcasting system as limitations on your horizons for profit.

The game is going to change. For the first time in memory, the technology, the society, the creative community, and the regulators seem to be moving in the same direction. That direction leads to more product, more suppliers, more specialized opportunities--and more risks. It will be a faster paced track, and the race will go to those who are alert to all new possibilities.

I am well aware of how the current institutional strictures restrain the best intentioned among you.

Creative program producers complain of being given insufficient lead time, skimpy budgets, and superficial and repetitious themes dictated by executives who fear a lull in the ratings. Syndicators despair of obtaining advertiser support and reasonable time slots for new and different programming.

Broadcasters feel unfairly castigated. You put on a program of excellence and get clobbered in the ratings. You remind us that broadcasting is a business, not a charity. And you warn us that if the going gets too

tough, there may be different audiences to program for in the children's time slots.

There is a collective hand-wringing. You acknowledge the validity of much of the criticism leveled at you and then look accusingly at someone else in the broadcaster-supplier-advertiser chain as the source of the problem.

I can hardly blame you. Given the dynamics of an industry where the costs must be borne primarily by advertisers who spend \$600 million a year to reach children with their message, broadcasters cannot afford to try to sell time on shows that will not deliver the audience to those advertisers. The commercial broadcasting audience cannot endorse programs by paying directly for programs they like intensely.

The children's programming industry is, after all, only a microcosm of the overall television advertiser to viewer chain. It is hard to ask someone to voluntarily act against his or her economic self interest. Your criteria for success are economic standards, whether that standard is ratings or cost per thousand.

You respond best to the traditional incentives of the marketplace. It must often seem, with children's programs, that these incentives are weaker than in other program areas. The child audience is smaller than other major audience segments. Children appeal as consumers to a limited number of advertisers, although for some of these advertisers they are an important target. Producers of good children's programming are likely to receive little adult public recognition for their work, beyond awards by such groups as Action for Children's Television.

While expensive programming is not necessarily good programming, good programming is often expensive. Children's programs that will be viewed require thought, research, development and first-rate production values. Even the Children's Televisior Workshop, consistently recognized as a prominent force in children's television, does not survive on its awards. It recently announced a new science program for 8-12 year olds at a cost of \$9.6 million.

Given these problems, excellent programming for children would seem beyond the capacity of the existing commercial television system. Yet recent program efforts show that children can be drawn in significant numbers to more than merely animated escapism. News and information programs for children such as Thirty Minutes, Razzmatazz, Kids are People Too, and Marlo and The Magic Movie Machine are a relatively new phenomenon. Kids World gives children an opportunity to report on events taking place in their community. The Afterschool and Weekend Specials and Special Treats dramatize issues of importance to children in ways that are sensitive, humorous and entertaining. After twenty-five years, young children still eagerly follow the daily adventures of Captain Kangaroo. Many more examples of fine children's programming efforts--both national and local--have been sent to us in our children's inquiry.

But in an overall schedule that is often stale and repetitious, the public loses sight of the few excellent efforts sprinkled about the week and criticizes children's programming as all looking alike and sounding the same. What most irritates viewers is the lack of program choice for children at any given hour. When animated entertainment is on one network, it

is often also on the other two. When there is an evening prime time special for children on one network it is frequently scheduled against specials on the other networks. This situation produces no winners. Audiences are split, ratings are reduced and everyone, once again, feels done in by the system.

Recently two prominent industry figures have recognized this problem and proposed means to remedy it. Citing the paralyzing effect of the ratings, CBS President William Paley has proposed joint network cooperation to produce high quality prime time programming. His proposal has been endorsed by the Caucus of Producers, Writers and Directors. A similar plan for network cooperation to create high caliber children's programming has been suggested by Kenneth Mason, President of Quaker Oats.

Both plans deserve full consideration by all affected parties. But both are attempts to make minimal changes--even if perhaps of short term importance--in the basic existing system of three-network competition. In the long run, I hope your vision is even broader.

The public's complaints--and those of professionals within the industry--are directed at the industry as it presently exists. I do not think it is naive or "blue sky" to think about more radical future changes.

As a nation, we have demonstrated the inventiveness and creativity to develop new communications technologies. You now have the technical ability to distribute video programming in a variety of formats. You should have the commercial insight to anticipate new markets and make a profit by serving newly perceived needs.

We at the FCC should be able to draw upon these same creative energies to loosen the economic and regulatory bottlenecks that now restrain development

of more flexible forms of program distribution. A fundamental principle with me--based on my belief in the First Amendment--is that many independent media voices are preferable to a few. At the Commission, we are charged with implementing this principle. I think we can best do so by creating and maintaining conditions in the communications marketplace that will enable alternate forms of program distribution to emerge naturally in response to viewer and advertiser demand.

The happy marriage of satellites and cable is quickly solving the spectrum scarcity bottleneck. As quickly as Mork communicates with Ork, we now can send programming instantly across the country. With the number of potential channels greatly expanded, new creative concepts are needed to make them come alive.

One impetus to fill these channels is the growing recognition that people will pay for programs--especially if it means that they will have control over what they and their children will see. Even in these times of economic uncertainty, the Washington Post poll showed that over a third of those interviewed indicated their willingness to pay more than \$80 a year for an alternative to present TV fare.

We are already seeing signs of real change. Last year, UA-Columbia Cablevision, in conjunction with the Learning Corporation of America, launched Calliope. This children's entertainment package offers one hour weekly of top quality children's movies, including ballet and mime performances. Cable companies pay for the service at the monthly rate of 15 cents a subscriber. Calliope, an additional service to UA Columbia's Madison Square Garden sports package, is received in approximately 850,000 households.

9

Warner Cable has now created Nickelodeon, a children's channel with a varied entertainment format for preschoolers to adolescents. The channel, a continuous 13 hour a day, seven day a week children's service, grew out of QUBE, Warner's two-way cable system in Columbus, Ohio. Like a video sandbox, Nickelodeon offers film series, animation, video comic books, music and teen shows, and short informational pieces. Available to cable systems at a monthly cost of 10 cents a household, Nickelodeon will be received initially by more than 1 million subscribers when it goes on satellite in April.

Home Box Office, the biggest pay cable company, has also made a commitment to children and family entertainment in its new pay package "Take 2."

These are just tentative first steps to open up a market where literally the sky is the limit. But eventually, as the competition becomes more intense, program producers should find this a new and growing market outside the traditional commercial broadcast system. All of these approaches permit the programmer to reach intense consumer desires, not just count eyeballs.

Another potential outlet for the innovative producer will be the booming video cassette and video disc market. Surely there is more to fill the disc than off-the-air copies, X-rated movies and pirated block busters. Test marketing of the MCA-Magnavox videodisc system in Atlanta has produced extraordinary consumer demand and even a black market for the machine. Videodisc systems from RCA and Japanese firms are expected within a year. The vitality of the children's record industry should provide a clue that children will be eager users of the products of this new technology.

Don't be deceived into thinking that all possible new program markets are far down the road. Apply some of your creativity and imagination to innovations in the present market structure.

As Southern Satellites Systems and WTCG have shown us, any station can be a new network. With revenue from advertisers eager to reach a national audience, independent superstations may soon have the funds and the incentive to program--either separately, or by banding together--for a national child audience.

Even within the traditional broadcasting system, you are not limited to Saturday morning on three networks. The children's audience exists throughout the broadcast day. For example, the FCC years ago ruled that networks could recover the 7:30 - 8:00 p.m. "prime time access" period if they programmed for children. High quality and extremely popular syndicated access programming, such as The Muppet Show, has proved that a family/child audience is there for the taking. Yet the networks have not seen fit to attempt to recapture any weekday prime time access by doing children's programming. Thus the opportunity is still there for other access time producers.

The younger child audience is not the only potential access period target. Programs such as Norman Lear's new show "The Baxters," which combines comedy, social issues and local audience reaction, may help pre-teens and teenagers to think about public issues without moralizing to them. In other time periods, Operation Prime Time and Mobil Oil's major successes in establishing consortia of network and independent stations for such programs as "The Bastard" and "Edward The King" show the rewards of persistence and ingenuity. Advertisers, as well as producers and broadcasters, can initiate these ventures.

Ironically, there even exists a large pool of programming for children, free to broadcasters for the asking, that lies underused. The U.S. Office of Education has funded \$40 million in children's television programs over the past four years. For a \$15 to \$20 charge per show to cover distribution costs, commercial as well as non-commercial broadcasters can obtain such entertaining series such as Infinity Factory, which illustrates everyday math applications, Villa Allegre, a bilingual series, and Rebop. These HEW series are represented by TVAC, Television for All Children. How many of you who are broadcasters have even considered this option?

Finally, one of the most important resources for new children's production is public television. Public television made its reputation by airing programs--like Sesame Street--that the networks rejected. Now, recognizing that public television needs to enlarge its old neighborhood--beyond the boundaries of Mr. Rogers, Sesame Street and the Electric Company--the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is spearheading an effort to bring new funds and creativity to bear on other programming needs of children.

CPB is seeking \$20 to \$30 million for new children's programming and has called for the combined efforts of independent producers, as well as PBS stations, to develop new series. And, if the Carnegie Commission's vision of a fully funded public system comes to pass--as I hope it will--there will be even greater opportunity for independent program production, with the support of \$190 million for national series and an equal amount available for local production. For the creative community, that surely is a worthwhile market.

Under our economic system, innovative programming works best when it maximizes the financial interests of the participating parties. Why are there not more cooperative efforts between commercial and public broadcasting to spread the costs of children's programming? Group W stations co-produced last year's successful "Six American Families" with public broadcasting, and ABC is putting funds into a new public television retrospective on The Vietnam War.

I challenge you to consider additional joint ventures between the many means of program distribution. You can put together program packages that cut across technologies and deliver the cumulative audience you need to justify your investment, through successive distribution by commercial and public broadcasting, cable and videodisc.

History tells us that we must be inventive and be willing to take some risks in order to achieve any triumphs. Remember that when television was first invented, many asked why radio was not enough.

We at the FCC are not merely cheering you on from the sidelines. We are working to create a regulatory climate that is more conducive to producers who seek to reach a variety of audiences. In our children's inquiry, we are considering a wide range of regulatory options. One suggestion would have us require fixed amounts of age-targeted and informational programming for children, in order to insure a continued broadcast market for more diverse children's programs. We are also considering proposals to cluster commercials on the hour or half-hour. This would leave the program producer free of interruption in creating and sustaining a sensitive emotion or thought for a child, while at the same time bracketing the advertising more clearly from the programming itself.

But any regulatory mandates we adopt may ultimately be transitory in nature. For the children's program market to function most adequately, changes in the marketplace are necessary and certainly preferable to continued government oversight. Freeing the new technologies with their greater abundance will permit a more direct response to consumer demands, and eventually may reduce any real need for FCC regulation.

Children's programming ultimately transcends strict boundaries and tidy definitions. It reflects, in miniature, the strengths and weaknesses of our existing program supply market. The issue, at its essence, is the need for diversity of program choice. It is time to recognize that your creative minds can produce and distribute more diverse children's programming without undermining the financial underpinnings of your professions. In fact, profit incentives may dictate that you must move to greater use of alternative distribution mechanisms, as children become a declining portion of the mass commercial broadcasting audience.

You can realize a profit and at the same time feel better about what you are doing. You can do well by doing good. That should be the incentive to you to rethink established patterns and seek new producing and marketing arrangements.

It is clear to me that America's honeymoon with the one-eyed beauty is coming to an end. Now is the time for you and the viewing public to establish a more mature, meaningful, and lasting relationship.